

John Howard Lawson

The Process of Selection

John Howard Lawson (1894 – 1977) was a leading Hollywood screenwriter and Broadway playwright, and the first president of the Writers Guild of America. His book Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting, published in 1949, is one of the better articulations of the fundamentals of dramatic construction.

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How does the selection [of events by the playwright] proceed?

How is tension sustained and increased?

What is the immediate causal connection between the scenes?

How about emphasis and arrangement?

How does the dramatist decide the precise order, or continuity of events?

How does he decide which are the big scenes, and which of secondary importance, and the links between them?

How does he decide the length of scenes, the number of characters?

How about probability, chance and coincidence?

How much of the action must be represented on the stage, and how much may be shown in retrospect or in narrative form?

What is the exact relationship between *unity of theme* and *unity of action* in the play's progression?

From *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (1949) (p.187)

John Howard Lawson Progression

If we observe an action as we actually perform it in our daily experience, we find that any action (regardless of its scope) consists in (a) the decision (which includes the consciousness of the aim and of the possibilities of its accomplishment); (b) the grappling with difficulties (which are more or less expected, because the decision has included a consideration of possibilities); (c) the test of strength (the moment toward which we have been heading, when, having done our best to evade or overcome the difficulties, we face the success or failure of the action); (d) the climax (the moment of maximum effort and realization).

A play may contain any number of lesser cycles of action, but these can invariably be grouped in four divisions; since the rising action is the longest of the divisions and includes a larger number of sub-divisions, the movement of the play is somewhat as follows:

A b c d e f G H

A is the exposition; b c d e f are cycles of the rising action; G is the obligatory scene; H is the climax. A may contain two or more cycles of action. G and H are more concentrated, but may also include several cycles. Since an action is our *unit of movement*, we are able to divide any of the subordinate actions in the same way. For example, c reaches a climax which is the culmination of a system of action of which the exposition, rising action, and obligatory scene may be traced. The whole group, b c d e f also constitutes a system, of which b may be the exposition, c and d the rising action, e the obligatory scene and f the climax.

From *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (1949) (p.246)

John Howard Lawson

The Principles of Continuity

- (1) the exposition must be fully dramatized in terms of action;
- (2) the exposition must present possibilities of extension which are equal to the extension of the stage action;
- (3) two or more lines of causation may be followed if they find their solution in the root-action;
- (4) the rising action is divided into an indeterminate number of cycles;
- (5) each cycle is an action and has the characteristic progression of an action – exposition, rise, clash and climax;
- (6) the heightening of the tension as each cycle approaches its climax is accomplished by increasing the emotional load; this can be done by emphasizing the importance of what is happening, by underlining fear, courage, anger, hysteria, hope;
- (7) tempo and rhythm are important in maintaining and increasing tension;
- (8) the linking of scenes is accomplished by abrupt contrast or by overlapping of interest;
- (9) as the cycles approach the root-action [climax], the tempo is increased, the subsidiary climaxes are more intense and grouped more closely together, and the action between the points is cut down;
- (10) probability and coincidence do not depend on physical probability, but on the value of the incident in relation to the root-action [climax];
- (11) the play is not a simple continuity of cause and effect, but the inter-play of complex forces; new forces may be introduced without preparation provided their effect on the action is manifest;
- (12) tension depends on the emotional load which the action will bear before the moment of explosion is reached.

From *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (1949) (p.232-3)

John Howard Lawson
The Cycle of Conflict

- (a) recognition of difficulties and determination to overcome them;
- (b) progressive development of struggle;
- (c) partial achievement;
- (d) new difficulties and increased determination.

From *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* (1949) (p.222)

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